

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3105

March 29, 2021

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I greatly appreciate that the medical staff at the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center in Albuquerque heeded concerns raised by my staff regarding the lack of vaccine deployment to Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) and other VA connected facilities. The Medical Center Director has not only deployed vaccines to the CBOCs across the state over the last month, but has now expanded eligibility to enrolled veterans of any age. In a large, rural state like New Mexico, these are necessary actions to ensure every veteran is able to access the vaccine and help New Mexico defeat this virus. I would also like to express my appreciation for all that you have done already in the short time you have been at the helm of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Our veterans deserve the best quality of care the VA can provide, and I am eager to work with you and your team to strengthen VA programs and service here in New Mexico and VA's nationwide.

However, there is more that can be done to ensure that every veteran in New Mexico is able to safely and quickly get a vaccine. I have heard from a number of veterans who use the VA system in New Mexico that they have not received proactive communication to schedule an appointment or been provided information when the vaccine would be available at a facility near their place of residence. The VA has many tools at its disposal to contact veterans receiving care from their facilities—and yet, many of these same veterans have been forced to turn to the New Mexico Department of Health's registration system to receive their vaccine due to this poor communication and limited outreach. Based on the VA allocation of vaccines to New Mexico, it does not seem to be a supply issue. We are already facing an uphill battle with hesitancy from veterans to take a vaccine due to misinformation and fear. Unclear communication and guidelines from their trusted health care provider does not help. I, therefore, ask the VA to develop an emergency communications plan to make contact with every veteran currently eligible for a vaccine through the VA in New Mexico and that the VA make every possible attempt to ensure these veterans receive their vaccines as soon as possible.

The development of a targeted communications plan will help make contact with hard-to-reach and vulnerable populations, like many of the elderly, immunocompromised, and disable veterans in New Mexico. Likewise, to my knowledge, no effort has been made by the VA to coordinate the transportation needed to assist veterans living in rural areas, high poverty tracks, or those without access to safe transportation to VA run vaccine sites.

As you establish the strategy to reach veterans in New Mexico, I have also heard that the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center and its affiliate CBOCs are not providing regular updates to the New Mexico Department of Health on how many veterans it has vaccinated in the state. A whole-of-government approach is needed to defeat the virus. Only when the VA provides detailed information on how many doses and where it is providing those doses in New Mexico can we accomplish this goal. The state is not able to effectively determine where it should allocate the doses it receives or establish a count of those still needing a vaccine in the state without this information. I strongly encourage the VA to look at how it can be a better partner with the state of New Mexico.

Finally, I implore the VA to work diligently to enact the *SAVE LIVES Act*, signed by President Biden on March 24, 2021. This expansion of vaccines to veterans not enrolled in the VA system, and to spouses and caregivers of veterans, follows through on a shared goal to get every American vaccinated as quickly as possible. To be successful in this effort the VA must quickly provide guidance to medical staff throughout the VA health system that is unequivocally clear on how they should implement this expansion in their system, what documentation veterans and their families need to provide, and how the VA should track and report who is receiving a vaccine by this expansion.

Through their years of service to our country, veterans have earned the right to access the best medical care our nation has to offer, including the COVID-19 vaccine. There is so much work to be done to expand this access to every veteran in New Mexico, and I am confident in your ability to accomplish this goal. I appreciate your prompt attention to this matter, and am proud to serve as your partner through this process, ready to support the improved distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to New Mexican veterans in any way that I can.

Sincerely,



Ben Ray Luján
United States Senator